The Strengths and Challenges of Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy: What the Research Says

Nellie Mae Education Foundation
Opening Doors to Tomorrow

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

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The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) at Brown University is a national research and reform support organization. AISR promotes quality education for all children by building capacity for systemic education reform among policy-makers, district leaders, educators, parents, and community groups, especially those serving low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. The Annenberg Institute works with district central offices and community constituencies to explore and refine the concept of "smart education systems" – networks of schools, community organizations, and services that promote high-quality student learning and development inside and outside of schools.[1]

An important part of that work is to provide research, data analysis, capacity building, and other supports for adult and youth organizing groups working for education reform. In New York City, staff now part of AISR pioneered a collaborative model for parent- and youth-led education organizing in the South Bronx.[2] This work laid the foundation for additional neighborhood collaboratives and the formation in 2006 of the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice, a citywide collaborative of parent organizing groups. AISR staff were instrumental in the formation of the Urban Youth Collaborative, a citywide coalition of five youth-led organizations.

Building on the work in New York City, AISR staff now provide support to other local and state education organizing initiatives. We are also expanding our capacity to provide research and policy support to community organizations focused on federal policy.

In addition to supporting organizing efforts, AISR specializes in conducting research on education organizing. The 2009 series Organized Communities, Stronger Schools was a national study to examine the impact of urban community and youth organizing on school and district capacity to promote student learning. The study concluded that there is strong evidence for the impact of community organizing on resource allocations and equity, relationships between schools and families, teacher professional culture, and student outcomes. The study also identified key aspects of organizational capacity that are important for leading successful campaigns.[3]

The Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series, of which this research report is a part, further builds on this research agenda. The series includes this research report, an executive summary, and a directory of community organizations in New England doing education organizing. All three products are available at <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php>.

[1] For more information, see <www.annenberginstitute.org/Vision/index.php>.

[2] These staff joined the Annenberg Institute in 2006.

[3] See <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/OrganizedCommunities.php>.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) is the largest charitable organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. NMEF believes that to improve collective prospects for the future, all learners must possess the skills and knowledge necessary for full participation in postsecondary education, work, and life. Toward this end, NMEF supports the promotion and integration of developmentally appropriate, rigorous, student-centered approaches to learning at the middle and high school levels. These approaches acknowledge that in today's world, students need to know not only math and English, but also how to collaborate, solve problems, and utilize technology.

Student-centered approaches draw on the science of how people learn and are characterized by: innovative uses of time; the inclusion of a wider variety of adults to complement teachers in all aspects of learning; the measurement of skills and mastery of content using a combination of performance-based assessments and traditional testing; an acknowledgement that learning takes place both in and out of the classroom; and a persistent focus on the needs and interests of learners. In this type of educational experience, learning becomes the constant, and the *where*, *when*, and *how* it happens – as well as *who* the adults are who facilitate it – become the variables.

In an effort to serve as a catalyst for a remodeled educational system, NMEF utilizes a three-part strategic approach:

- We work with practitioners to develop and enhance effective, evidence-based, student-centered approaches to learning.
- We dedicate ourselves to shaping policies that allow these approaches to flourish.
- We concentrate on increasing public understanding and demand for high-quality educational experiences for all learners.

NMEF awards grants primarily through four strategic initiatives:

- District Level Systems Change, which includes the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches, as well as policy and community organizing/advocacy work at the district level;
- State Level Systems Change, which focuses on promoting state and federal education policies that support student-centered learning at scale;
- Research and Development, which not only informs our work, but also that of practitioners in the fields of education and philanthropy;
- Public Understanding, which aims to increase both awareness of student-centered learning experiences and the public demand to implement them.

NMEF understands that community organizing and engagement is essential to attaining its goals. Rather than engaging communities at the end of efforts, NMEF works with its District Level Systems Change grantees to include community partners in the design, development, and implementation of reforms.[4] For these reasons, NMEF commissioned the Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series.[5]

[4] For more information, see <www.nmefdn.org/grantmaking/Initiatives/District>.

[5] See <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php> for more information on the series.

Contents

Introduction

Community organizing for school reform offers an urgently needed alternative to traditional school reform – one that situates schooling issues within larger economic and social systems, directly attends to issues of power, and builds democratic capacity to sustain meaningful reform over the long term (Anyon 2005; Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a; Oakes & Rogers 2006; Shirley 2009). Perhaps the largest and most recognizable example of community organizing for school reform was the national desegregation of the education system that followed the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Desegregation was ordered by the court; but building public will to challenge racist practices and accept huge changes in the structure of public schools was the result of decades of careful research, planning, and community organizing (Kluger 2004).[6]

Though their work is not at the scale of the national civil rights movement, organizers around the nation are currently working in communities to ensure that historically marginalized parents and students can participate in local, state, and national education debates and decisions. With the Obama administration's recent announcement recommending that parents become more involved in high-stakes, local education policy decisions, it is important to understand the growing momentum behind the community organizing approach to school reform.[7]

Research has shown that around the nation, the community organizing approach to school reform has led to successes such as increases in education funding, more equitable distribution of education resources, greater access to college preparatory curricula, and more effective teacher recruitment and retention in hard-to-staff schools (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a). One example – the Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP) – appears in the recent directory of community organizations doing education organizing in New England that is part of the Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series.[8] BYOP's primary aim is "to increase youth power and create positive social change," which it accomplishes by working on specific school reforms such as increased access to guidance counselors, funding for textbooks, clean bathroom facilities, and safe, accessible transportation to school, as well as campaigns to increase local and national funding for education (Renée, Welner & Oakes 2010). Local community organizing efforts like this are increasing around the nation (Shirley 2009).

Local community organizations are also building their capacity to work at the state policy level (Oakes & Rogers 2006) and, even more recently, at the federal policy level. BYOP, for example, worked in collaboration with the Alliance for Education Justice, a new national alliance of youth organizations, to voice its support of the Obama administration's increased federal spending on education.

Another trend around the country is for organizing to progress from a focus on the condition of facilities and school safety to core issues of teaching and learning (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a). Issues of immediate safety and school facilities are a natural place for community organizations to begin their work – these issues are most visible to students and parents, who interact with a school every day. And unfortunately, many schools still struggle with basic needs that must be remedied before instructional and cultural changes

[6] Community organizing has a long history in the United States. Warren (2001), Shirley (1997), and Oakes and Rogers (2006) provide excellent reviews of the historical roots of modern education organizing, including the evolution of the theories of Saul Alinsky and others. To learn more about the history of community organizing in the Latino community, we recommend G. San Miguel Jr. and R. Valencia, "From the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to Hopwood: The Educational Plight and Struggle of Mexican Americans in the Southwest," *Harvard Education Review* 68, no. 3 (1998). To learn about the history of community organizing in the African American community, we recommend C. M. Payne and A. Green, eds., *Time Longer than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850–1950* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

[7] Secretary Arne Duncan's speech regarding this recommendation can be found at <www.ed.gov/news/speeches/equity-and-education-reform-secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-annual-meeting-naacp>.

[8] See <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php> for all three products in the series: this research report, the directory of community organizations, and an executive summary.

can take hold. For example, one youth organizing group identified in our New England scan – Youth Rights Media of New Haven, Connecticut – recently completed a campaign to move an alternative school for struggling students out of a live armory, where students came into contact with armed National Guardsmen every day.[9]

Organizations must address these immediate concerns. But a national study of community organizing found that as leaders and staff build a deeper understanding of issues facing schools and develop their confidence and reputation as powerful advocates, they often focus more closely on issues of school capacity and student achievement. South Central Youth Empowered thru Action, the youth organizing arm of the Community Coalition in Los Angeles, for example, began its education organizing by fighting for funding to repair and replace crumbling, neglected school buildings and provide basic supplies like up-to-date textbooks for the high schools its youth leaders attended. After convincing the school board to allocate extra funds to improve schools in low-income neighborhoods, youth leaders surveyed their peers to identify issues for subsequent campaigns. The surveys identified the lack of access to college preparatory classes as students' central concern. Youth leaders began documenting disparities in course offerings in low-income high schools – one school offered nine sections of cosmetology and only four of algebra – and worked with UCLA researchers, other organizing groups, and a range of advocacy and service groups to launch a campaign to equalize access to college prep classes across the district (Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009).

The evolution from concerns about facilities, materials, and safety to campaigns that unpack the work of teaching and learning is far from linear. But there is clear evidence that the issues community organizations work on largely reflect the issues that research has shown matter most for school improvement (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a; Oakes & Rogers 2006; Shirley 2009). Furthermore, community organizing, with its emphasis on building long-term, mutually accountable relationships and developing distributed leadership, is a particularly apt strategy for building trust among school stakeholders (Shirley 2009). The Consortium on Chicago School Research identified five "essential supports" shared by those Chicago schools that had accelerated student improvement: leadership, parent–community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, and ambitious instruction. Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009a) found that nearly all the campaign issues taken up by the groups it studied had direct bearing on at least one of these essential supports and that groups were able to effect real change in these domains.

[9] Personal interview with Laura McCargar, March 18, 2010.

Overview

This paper examines a small but growing body of literature on community organizing for education reform. The field of research is just emerging and includes case studies of individual organizations and efforts; regional and national scans of the field; theoretical investigations of why this reform strategy matters; and one large study documenting the impact of community organizing on education policy, school capacity, and student educational outcomes across organizations. It is important to emphasize that community organizing, like education reform, exists within a practical, political, and normative context. It would not only be impossible and impractical, but also unethical to completely isolate a community organization and measure its impact by examining only test score gains or number of policy wins (Shirley 2002). Community organizing for education reform aims to build the capacity of a community, increase the efficacy of individuals, change the dialogue around reform so it complements the needs of a community, and ultimately improve the educational, social, and political environments within and surrounding schools so they more effectively educate under-served young people.

That is not to say that community organizing is abstract or intangible – quite the opposite. Community organizers are on the ground in schools and at decision-making tables daily because they want to see real, systemic reforms reach students in a timely way. But community organizers work to overhaul the entire process of schooling: how problems are defined, who is included in developing and implementing decisions, and what is the role of schools and education in our society. This paper aims to guide the reader through this multilayered understanding by first presenting a clear definition of community organizing for school reform, describing the practical aspects of how it works, and going into depth about what makes this strategy unique. We then look at existing evidence on the impact of community organizing. The paper concludes with a discussion of both the strengths and limitations of this approach to school reform.

How Does Community Organizing for School Reform Work?

Community organizing for school reform leverages the collective power of parents, youth, community residents, and/or institutions to alter existing power relationships and policies and create more accountable, equitable, and high-quality schools for all students. Key aspects of this definition are outlined in the sidebar. Thinking about the questions, Why? Who? What? and How? helps structure the definition of community organizing.

Why?

The answer to this question is perhaps most straightforward – community organizing aims to alter longstanding power relationships that produce failing schools in under-served communities in order to create excellent and accountable school systems for all students.

Though the terms in this description are expressed in straightforward language, many of them need further unpacking. The first term is "alter longstanding power relationships." While some community organizing takes the form of direct protest, community organizing is also about building powerful collaborations and partnerships. The goal is to challenge the patterns of inequality that are built into the rules and laws that guide schools; the individual beliefs of many educators and administrators about who is capable of learning; and the relationships between stakeholders that dictate how a reform is adopted and implemented. This is done in multiple ways, from joining in partnership with key stakeholders to ensuring that parents have a meaningful role in shaping (not just signing onto) a reform.

For example, Renée (2006) explains that simply having members of the impacted community present and involved while a decision is being made can shift the tenor of a public debate. When community members are absent, policy-makers can talk about "those schools" and "those students" in the abstract. But when a policy-maker listens to the testimony of a

young person who attends a low-performing school, those references become real. It is hard to look at a group of young people who came all the way to a government meeting and say, "Those kids don't care about learning." It is equally challenging to look at those young people and say, "I can't find the resources to help you succeed." Thus, the testimony of a young person changes the debate on multiple levels by:

- bringing different analyses of a problem and sometimes even different solutions into the debate;
- ensuring that the policy-makers are accountable to a present public; and
- transforming the way the policy-makers think about under-served students and communities.

Community organizing for equitable school reform works by:

- bringing together public school parents, youth, and community residents and/or institutions to engage in collective dialogue and action for change;
- building grassroots leadership by training under-served parents, youth, and community members in organizing and civic engagement skills;
- building political power by mobilizing large numbers of people around a unified vision and purpose;
- recognizing that education problems and their solutions are systemic and thus focusing on accountability, equity, and quality for all students, rather than exclusively on gains for individual students;
- understanding that the education system is a central part of community well-being and that improving schools also includes building the economic, cultural, and political well-being of the community;
- aiming to alter longstanding power relationships that produce failing schools in communities serving high numbers of under-served learners; and
- using the tactics of organizing to bring public attention to an issue, demonstrate that large numbers of people are concerned about an issue, or put pressure on decision-makers or public systems when necessary.

Current federal policies require states to create standards and assessments to measure student learning, then create a series of rewards and sanctions for schools that fail to show growth according to those assessments. This approach focuses on holding students accountable for learning and teachers for teaching, but does not hold policy-makers accountable for providing the resources or conditions needed for students to learn.

Community organizing, in contrast, focuses on the accountability of policy-makers and school leaders to students, parents, and the community. From this standpoint, low test scores are seen not as the failure of a single student, teacher, or principal, or as the unfortunate consequence of complex social factors, but as proof that the education system as a whole is failing to provide all young people with all of the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to learn and become educated citizens.

Welner (2001) writes that the true measure of education equity lies in the extent to which treatment of less powerful people and groups "confer[s] benefits equal to those obtained by more powerful people and groups." This measure is intentionally systemic – it focuses on groups of people, not individuals, and on systems, not classrooms. It also explains equity not as giving everyone the same thing, but rather as ensuring that resources are distributed in such a way that they create equal benefits to all people. Such a notion of equity has a historical presence in education policy – the free and reduced-price lunch program provides a well-known example. Equity, in this program, means that all students are provided with enough to eat – not that equal government dollars are spent feeding each student in the school.

Finally, though seemingly neutral, the definition of high-quality learning is constantly being refined and negotiated. For some groups, this means a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, for others it means a community school, and so on. That said, most educationally focused community organizations are explicit in outlining their own definitions of high quality.

Who?

The who of community organizing is clear. Organizations work in communities and schools – with parents, youth, residents, and/or institutions. Some community organizations work with all populations and institutions; others work with a particular racial, ethnic, economic, geographic, or social community. Community organizing for education reform explicitly focuses on working with – not just on behalf of – low-income communities and communities of color.

The sidebar on page six provides definitions of the different kinds of nonprofit organizations that work on community and education issues. There are a number of excellent advocacy organizations that work on behalf of under-served communities, as well as service providers who provide them with much-needed support. But these are not the types of community organizing groups discussed in this report. Community organizing, as we define it, is a strategy that specifically works to increase the power of a marginalized community so that residents can speak and act for themselves.

In the field, the distinction is also talked about in terms of "having a base." Community organizing groups have a base of people who are from the community and lead the organization. Paid staff can work for community organizing groups, but the leadership structure and power come from this base of community members. Community organizing groups often work in partnership with advocacy organizations, service providers, and others, but they have a unique definition of their work and strategies (Evans 2009).

What? and How?

What community organizations do and how they do it add additional layers to the definition. Community organizers do not need to take a neutral or objective stance on the problems in the education system, nor do they need to balance competing demands arising from district and states mandates and from federal rules, regulations, and policies. Rather, community organizations and their members start from their own self-interest – creating and maintaining quality schools and healthy communities for their children to study and live in.

From this place of self-interest, organizers engage in a collective dialogue among people engaged in local schools; they identify concerns, brainstorm solutions with allies, and then formulate a plan for creating change. Collective dialogue involves a careful process of reaching out to new and current members to develop relationships, discuss concerns and aspirations, and surface issues of shared concern. Organizing groups engage in a constant, iterative process of recruiting those most impacted by social problems and inequitable policies and developing broad, shared capacity to take leadership roles in demanding change. This process involves researching the dimensions of identified issues and how they affect the community, meeting with experts, building alliances with individuals and groups, and analyzing the political terrain (AISR 2010a). The collective dialogue process results in the identification of key issues and a plan for moving forward.

The next stage of the process involves taking some kind of collective action to implement the plan. The process, by definition, is democratic and requires participation from leaders, members, and often professional staff. Sometimes the campaign involves a single organization, but more often the community organizations build relationships with other community organizations, advocacy organizations, researchers,

Types of Nonprofit Education Organizations

Community Organizing. These groups have a membership and leadership drawn from a constituency that represents the community. Decisions are made by members/leaders, not by paid staff. Grassroots organizing groups provide members with political education and train them in leadership and organizing skills, including public speaking, negotiation with public officials, and member recruitment. Grassroots organizing groups use organizing tactics, including collective action, and put pressure on decision-makers and public systems when necessary. Community organizing is focused on systemic solutions and demands for equity.

Leadership Development. These groups work to help young people and/or adults develop particular skills in order to engage politically and civically, achieve their personal goals, and act as leaders in their communities. These might be focused on education or on other areas. These groups overlap with organizing groups in terms of the types of skills developed, and often they serve similar constituencies. These groups focus more on individual self-efficacy, education, and empowerment, rather than collective or contentious action.

Advocacy. These groups work on issues or sets of issues that impact a class of people. While they often work on behalf of low-income and under-served constituencies, the work of advocacy groups is carried out by professional staff. Most work is focused on putting pressure on elite places of power – public elections, elected officials/civic leaders, agency rule making, or school district decision-makers. Activities include research, building public awareness, advancing policy positions, and lobbying and advising elected officials and other decision-makers.

Community-Based. Community-based organizations are located in and serve the needs of a particular community. They engage in a variety of activities, including neighborhood and community development, cultural activities, adult education, leadership development, and sometimes direct provision of services. They may be led by paid staff or volunteers. While community-based organizations often have a constituency, mobilization and collective action is not a primary focus.

Service Provider. These are agencies or organizations that provide direct services, free or at a cost. These could include after-school care, medical care, social services, counseling, childcare, or housing assistance. Some service providers are independent nonprofits, and some are affiliated with government programs or agencies.

Parent Association or Fundraising. Often connected to a particular school, parent associations encourage the engagement of parents in supporting local school activities and/or decisions. While these associations have significant impact in some communities, they rely on traditional kinds of parent engagement – fundraising, volunteering, and creating auxiliary programs or funding streams.

politicians, and other key stakeholders to move the plan forward. In addition to developing an agenda, another explicit goal of engaging in this process is building the skills of the individual and, subsequently, the collective power of the group. Organizers are clear that leadership development is not something that simply evolves on its own. Many groups spend significant time training members in all aspects of a campaign – for example, how to lead a meeting, how to partner with a researcher, and how to write a press release.

From this discussion of the basics of community organizing, we now move into a more detailed discussion of what makes community organizing different from other school reform strategies. While touching on theory, our discussion is intentionally practical in providing real-world understanding and examples of community organizing.

What Makes Community Organizing a Unique Reform Strategy?

Transforming education systems is no simple task. Numerous scholars document the failure of decades of reform (Payne 2008; Oakes & Rogers 2006; Anyon 2005; Mintrop & Sunderman 2009). The compelling questions behind such analyses are "Why?" and "What can be done differently?"

Different scholars offer different answers:

- The combination of poor leadership, under-prepared teachers, and under-resourced school systems creates a self-reinforcing bureaucratic system in which change is impossible and both adults and students are demoralized (Payne 2008).
- Traditional reforms fail because they isolate the school from the larger political economy – and, in so doing, expect the education system to compensate for all other inequities in society (Anyon 2005).
- Few reforms take into account the long-term impact on an education system of multiple attempts to restructure it. Reforms and programs are implemented one after another, with little commitment to very much beyond short-term test-score gains. The result is instability both in the schoolhouse and community, which leads to fatigue and hopelessness about the potential for any new transformation scheme (Payne 2008; Mintrop & Sunderman 2009).
- A series of misguided beliefs guide conventional reform. One core belief is that inequality is contrary to American values and that there is public will to create equity in schools. It then follows that once professionals and educators learn about inequality, they will both be compelled and have the tools to equalize the education system. Another set of core beliefs is that schools function or ought to function like the free market – that increasing competition, ensuring that the bottom line is met (which, in schools, translates to test-score increases), and reforming systems from the top down, will create lasting and effective change. The logic of meritocracy is another core belief guiding modern schools. The idea is that any student who works hard can succeed, irrespective of whether or not that student has access to resources to learn and grow. These beliefs are, in fact, myths, and because conventional reforms fail to confront these beliefs directly, they fail in both practical and political terms (Oakes & Rogers 2006).

We have found in our review of research and in our own work that all of these problems play a role in the failure of school reform efforts. Community organizing for school reform offers an alternative to conventional reforms that have not worked – an alternative that situates schooling issues within larger economic and social systems, directly attends to issues of power, and builds democratic capacity to sustain meaningful reform over the long term.

Addressing Power Relationships

Community organizing begins with the assumption that school reform is a complex process that includes not only the practical business of curriculum and teaching, but also many layers of power, politics, beliefs, and culture (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a; Oakes & Rogers 2006; Renée 2006; Shirley 2009). Along with addressing the technical aspects of a reform (e.g., whether the school day should be extended, a new literacy curriculum adopted, or a high-stakes test implemented), community organizing also works toward understanding the power relationships that can move a reform forward or impede it. For example, some community organizers create "power maps" of the political terrain they are working on (Oakes & Rogers 2006). A power map can be drawn on a poster or interactive computer slide. Politicians, school leaders, and groups with power in the system are placed on the map based on how likely they are to support an idea, how much access the group has to them, and how much power they have to implement a change.

By discussing power and politics directly, organizers are able to identify potential allies and opponents in the system. They can also identify the kinds of strategic alliances and resources that will help them influence the political landscape. By the time a reform is implemented, the community organizers and their partners can then anticipate challenges to the reform. In contrast, many traditional reforms ignore micropolitics, and these seemingly small factors end up being the very things that impede implementation (Malen 1994; Oakes & Rogers 2006).

Political Will to Advance Equity

Community organizing also is unique in taking both an "outside in" and "inside out" approach to school reform. Organizing develops a broad constituency for reform and ensures that the proposals put forward reflect the needs and interests of those who will be impacted. Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009a) found that community organizations can create the political will needed to implement and sustain a particular change. This political will helps education officials justify implementing equity-driven changes that confront the interests of groups accustomed to favorable access to resources. Through negotiation, public awareness, and pressure, organizing creates a political environment in which demands for equity can gain traction, ultimately increasing the social capital of under-served communities so those gains can be sustained.

Because community organizers are often personally invested in a reform (they or their children attend the impacted school), they have a personal interest in the equitable implementation of policies. The creation of a default college preparatory curriculum in Los Angeles and the Grow Your Own Teacher program in Chicago are excellent examples. In Los Angeles, organizations began by holding protests against the district and ended up receiving a large grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation so that they could join the district in implementing the policy (Renée, Welner & Oakes 2010; Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009). In Chicago, what began as a successful program of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) to recruit, train, and retain community residents as teachers evolved into a state-funded collaboration between community organizations, universities, school districts, and the state (McAlister, Mediratta & Shah 2009). LSNA remains a key partner in the state collaboration.

Relevant, Innovative Solutions

Engaging the people most impacted by inequality and poverty in creating, adopting, and implementing reforms adds unique and relevant ideas and solutions to the process. Many examples appear in the directory of organizations doing education organizing in New England that is part of the Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series, along with this research report.[10]

Youth 4 Change (Y4C), a youth organization in Providence, Rhode Island, is working as part of a national coalition to implement a "Student Bill of Rights." While the content of the proposal, which frames a quality education as one of the basic human rights students should be entitled to, was developed nationally, young people are working locally to get the Bill of Rights implemented in Providence school-district policy. Y4C students recently used the Bill of Rights frame to organize a debate between mayoral candidates in Providence. While the candidates may have thought of some of the ideas covered by the Bill of Rights on their own, the fact that these youths were able to present a clear policy idea to the candidates and the public helps shift the focus of the overall mayoral debate to the ideas most important to the youths (Marcelo 2010).

[10] See <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php> for more information on the series.

In New Haven, Connecticut, low-income youth and their parents identified limited access to textbooks, inadequate translation services, and inconsistent school discipline as problems in their schools. Working through the organization Teach Our Children, these community members were able to make their concerns visible and worked with the school district to create equitable changes in all of these areas.

In both of these examples of successful community organizing, problems in local schools were identified not by education research, a Washington staffer, or a school district administrator. Rather, the people *within the system* came together to think about the problems, both acute and systemic, that they encountered in their (or their children's) education. They went from being concerned to proposing a solution and then worked to turn that solution into a policy. In the Connecticut case, the policies were passed, and the organization remains engaged to ensure that the district continues to enforce the new policies.

Beyond Education: Comprehensive Reform on Multiple Issues

Because many community organizations work on multiple issue areas like poverty, housing, transportation, or health care, their ideas and priorities embed school reform in a realistic and comprehensive web of social and economic issues (Anyon 2005). In fact, the majority of organizations identified in our New England assessment of community organizing and engagement work on multiple issues.

Multi-issue organizing can also lead to out-of-school services that create better conditions for students. For example, working on increasing access to public transportation ensures that students have a safe way to get to school; working to raise pay for low-wage jobs increases the income of families whose students attend school (Anyon 2005). In this way, community organizing demands that schools be an integral and central part of the community, not a separate, isolated institution (Warren 2001).

Building Democratic Capacity

In addition to bringing about tangible policy and performance benefits, community organizing builds the capacity and democratic participation of the community. For example, in a study of school reform in a small working-class California community, Delgado Gaitan (2001) found that by engaging in school reforms to benefit their children,

> these people changed their perception about their lives from one of deficit to empowerment, [which] led to the cultural changes in the family, the community, and in their personal lives. (p. 175)

Delgado Gaitan found empowerment to be a non-linear process, consisting of cycles of action and leadership development. Alliance building evolved organically and built long-term commitment, trust, and eventually engagement in the community.

Scholars of community organizing are not naive. They explain that community organizing works best when it is coupled with numerous other reform efforts (Renée, Welner & Oakes 2010; Shirley 2009). Community organizers, parents, and students are most successful in implementing change when they work in partnership with other reform partners – education researchers, political leaders, educators, and school and district leadership. There is a zone of mediation around school reform – a space where the confluence of multiple factors like power, policy, timing, funding, and so forth – interact to either promote or prevent reforms (Renée, Welner & Oakes 2010). Community organizing is perhaps best understood as a force – composed of the people most marginalized and under-served by existing systems – that uses democratic participation to shift the space so that it becomes more hospitable to equity.

Evidence of Impact

Qualitative Research and Case Studies

The body of research documenting the activities, processes, and outcomes of community organizing for school reform has grown precipitously over the past decade. While there are many examples of community organizing campaigns, we have chosen the following examples from the reforms that most closely align with the student-centered learning strategies that the Nellie Mae Education Foundation is interested in supporting.

Often referenced more simply as "education organizing," the research field was launched with two book-length studies documenting the emerging Alliance Schools model of school-based organizing developed by the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (Shirley 1997), an affiliate of the national Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), and the efforts of Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development to strengthen their city's schools (Orr 1999). As the number of community organizing groups pursuing educational change grew, more and more scholars turned their attention to documenting the methods and outcomes of education organizing campaigns.

To date, most of this research has been qualitative and has often taken the form of case studies (Warren 2001; Zachary & olatoye 2001; HoSang 2005; Evans 2009; Delgado Gaitan 2001). These studies describe the communities and neighborhoods in which organizing takes place; the process of building grassroots organizations and the various models of and approaches to education organizing; how local leaders identify issues, develop demands, and craft campaigns; and the concrete outcomes of these campaigns. Much of this research uses interview and observation data to explore the ways organizing groups interact with educators, reshape the culture and practices of schools, and contribute to social capital and personal transformation for individual participants.

Another body of research maps and analyzes trends in education organizing, such as the exponential growth of youth-led campaigns (Evans 2009; Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota 2006; Su 2009) and the use of research in education organizing (Renée 2006). Scholars have also worked to flesh out the theory of organizing as an equity-focused educational change strategy (Anyon 2005; McLaughlin 2009; Oakes & Rogers 2006; Renée, Welner & Oakes 2010).

This initial body of research has been qualitative and focused on individual cases; thus, it has offered limited evidence of links between education organizing and outcomes for schools and students in general. However, some common trends have emerged that point to the effectiveness of organizing as a strategy for improving equity, improving school culture, and winning policy and practice reforms that are in line with what the school reform literature identifies as best practices. One of the most studied education organizing efforts is the work of the Texas IAF to build a statewide network of Alliance Schools. The IAF applies community organizing principles to engage parents, community residents, teachers, and principals in shared work to strengthen instruction and address barriers to student success inside and outside of schools (Warren 2001; Shirley 1997, 2002). The Alliance Schools model has produced deep, meaningful engagement with parents and community members in schools across Texas; changed the way educators relate to each other and to students; and won hundreds of millions of dollars in additional funding to support professional development, health clinics, and other services for students, as well as community resources like ESL and GED courses.[11] Warren (2001) and Shirley (1997, 2002) have also documented the Alliance Schools' contribution to strengthening social capital among school communities and religious congregations.

[11] For more about the Alliance Schools model and a case study of the impact of the model in Austin, see Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister, 2009b.

The Challenges of Systematic Evaluation

As community organizing has grown in prominence and prevalence as a school reform strategy, the need to systematically examine its contributions to district- and school-level change and improved student outcomes has grown more acute. This has been no small challenge. Community organizing is a complex, iterative, unpredictable process tightly bound to the context in which it arises. Schools and districts become sites of organizing because of their particular connection to the families and community members who are involved in organizing. Issues are selected because they reflect specific local challenges and the needs and priorities of the individuals involved in organizing at a given moment.

It is therefore impossible to use an experimental or quasi-experimental design that randomly assigns schools or districts to "treatment" and "control" groups (Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009). These realities also mean that research findings cannot be replicated, as they often are in scientific research – the same conditions, context, and issues cannot be recreated in another setting, or even in the same setting at a different point in time. Another challenge is the impossibility of completely isolating the impacts of community organizing from the myriad other reform efforts often under way, particularly in low-performing schools, or from the impacts of teacher and leader turnover, changes in neighborhood demographics, or shifts in policy.

Research for Action Indicators Project

Despite these challenges, some progress has been made in elaborating methods for analyzing the outcomes of education organizing. In 2002, a team of scholars at Research for Action in Philadelphia and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (Gold, Simon & Brown 2002a) undertook an important project to develop a framework of indicators for education organizing that could begin to assess the impact of organizing activities on schools and communities. The framework builds on a theory of change that describes "how the work of community organizing groups creates a process that leads from increased community capacity to improved student learning" (p. 7).

The framework reflects the ways organizing groups intervene in schools: they develop collective capacity to demand public accountability for school performance and use that public accountability to work for changes in school practice, climate, and culture with the goal of improving student outcomes. Gold and colleagues (2004) identified eight indicators of community capacity and school improvement, along with related strategies, results, and data sources for documenting results. The researchers located more than 140 education organizations that met the criteria of working on equity, building cross-community alliances, developing democratic leadership, having an active membership base, and aiming to improve the civic participation and power of low-to-moderate-income communities. The team also published five case studies of various organizing efforts around the country and applied the framework to document impacts (Gold, Simon & Brown 2002b, 2002c; Blanc, Brown & Nevarez-LaTorre 2002; Simon, Gold & Brown 2002; Simon & Pikron-Davis 2002).

One example is the work of the Alliance Organizing Project in Philadelphia, which created new roles for parents in school and district decision making, increased parent–teacher collaboration, and secured new funding for after-school programs. In New York, ACORN used strategies developed to test compliance with fair housing policies to expose and end schools' racially discriminatory practices in informing parents about gifted programs; helped bring about changes at the state level to equalize access to high-quality curriculum and qualified teachers; opened a small, community-themed school; and won facilities and curriculum improvements in two other high schools (Simon & Pikron-Davis 2002).

Annenberg Institute Study: Organized Communities, Stronger Schools

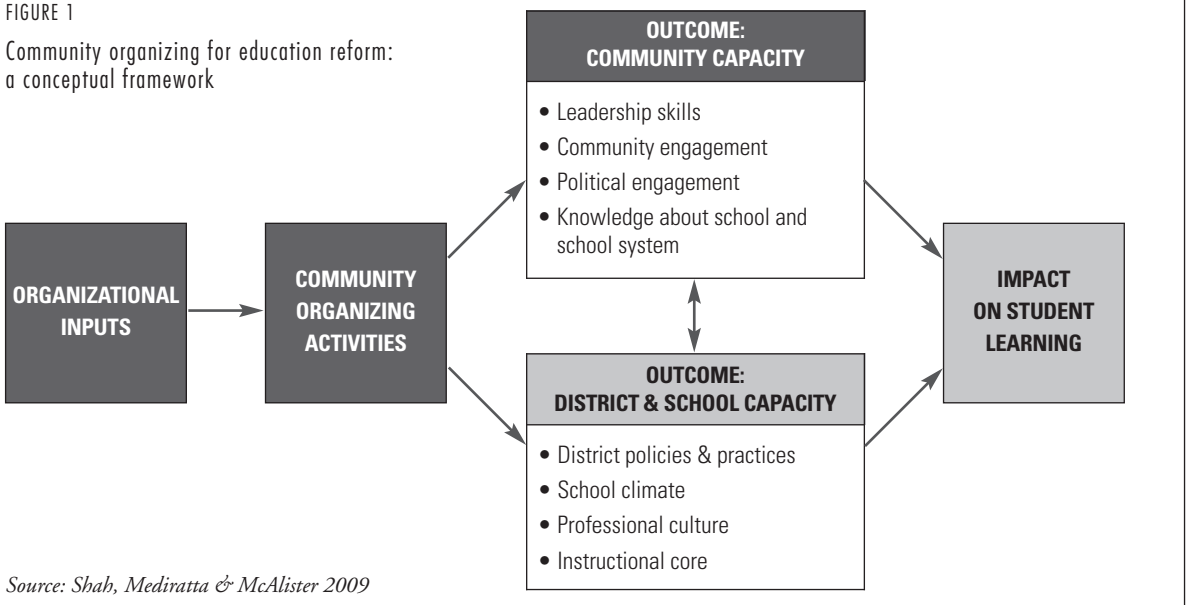
In 2002, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation commissioned a study of the impacts of education organizing on school capacity and student outcomes by researchers at the New York University Institute for Education and Social Policy (the same research team joined the Annenberg Institute in 2006; see footnote 1). The C. S. Mott Foundation had invested extensively in community organizing as a strategy to address poverty and was interested in systematically analyzing the contributions of community organizing to school improvement. The Annenberg Institute study Organized Communities, Stronger Schools built on the Institute for Education and Social Policy's previous work mapping the field of education organizing. It also built on Research for Action's indicators project, adopting a similar theory of change. Organized Communities, Stronger Schools used a rigorous, mixed-methods, multi-case study design to examine the work of seven established community organizing groups engaged in education campaigns.

Like Research for Action's indicators project, Organized Communities, Stronger Schools begins from a conceptual framework illustrating the way education organizing influences school capacity and, ultimately, student learning (see Figure 1). In the conceptual framework, organizational inputs and organizing activities simultaneously develop school and district capacity (defined as district policies and practices, school climate, professional culture, and instructional core) and community capacity (defined as leadership skills, community and political engagement, and knowledge about the school system). Community capacity enables organized communities to both support and hold districts and schools accountable for improvement. The increased capacity of schools and districts should create a stronger learning environment for students, which results in improved student learning outcomes (Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009).

The data sources included 321 interviews with educators, district and state officials, organizers, leaders, and allies; 75 observations of organizing activities; 509 teacher surveys; 241 surveys of adult organizing group members; 124 surveys of youth members; district

FIGURE 1

Community organizing for education reform: a conceptual framework



Source: Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009

administrative data; and media coverage of organizing campaigns and education issues (Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009). As noted earlier in this paper, an experimental or quasi-experimental design was inappropriate. Rather, the researchers looked for points of convergence across multiple qualitative and quantitative data sources. Where possible, researchers identified comparison groups of similar schools to further pinpoint impacts of education organizing on school capacity and student outcomes. The following sections review the major findings regarding impacts on district capacity, school capacity, student outcomes, and community capacity.

District Capacity

Across all sites, education organizing resulted in increased responsiveness to the demands and needs of low-income communities; new resources for facilities, curriculum, teacher development, and parent engagement; and new policies that reflected the priorities of organizing groups. In thirty-eight interviews, district and state leaders reported meeting regularly with organizing groups and indicated that organizing created the political space to respond to demands for equity. District and state leaders directly credited organizing groups with securing new resources, including $153 million for facilities in South Los Angeles, $11 million for a Grow Your Own Teacher pipeline in Illinois, and $8 million for the implementation of the Direct Instruction program in Florida. District and state officials also attributed important policy changes to organizing campaigns, including the creation of a new small-schools policy in Oakland, the Grow Your Own initiative in Illinois, the Direct Instruction initiative in Florida, and the new policy increasing access to college preparatory curriculum in Los Angeles (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a).

School Capacity

The definition of school capacity is based on what the research literature identifies as crucial building blocks for student learning (Elmore 1996, 2002, 2004; Mayer et al. 2000; Bryk & Schneider 2002), drawing heavily on the "essential supports" framework developed by the Consortium on Chicago School Research from years of data on Chicago public schools (Sebring et al. 2006). Because education organizing campaigns target aspects of school and district capacity, we use improvements in these domains as a major indicator of impact.

The analysis of school capacity draws primarily on surveys of 509 teachers in Miami, Austin, and Oakland, where intensive school-based organizing took place. In each site, surveys were administered to teachers in schools involved in organizing, as well as a set of demographically similar comparison schools (for a complete description of survey methodology see Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a, chapter 2). The survey data was complemented with interviews with teachers and principals across the sites.

Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009a) found either positive statistically significant results, or positive effect sizes, in favor of schools involved in organizing on most measures in Austin and Oakland and on several measures in Miami. Teachers rated teacher outreach to parents, parent influence in school decision making, teacher collaboration and commitment to school, and teacher influence in the classroom, in particular, more highly in organizing schools than in comparison schools. Importantly, teachers themselves strongly credited the organizing groups with influencing these improvements (p. 45). These findings are in line with interview data, in which teachers expressed that involvement with organizing groups had transformed school culture to allow deep collaboration with parents, as well as the development of collegial, mutually accountable professional culture among teachers.

Student Outcomes

Data on student outcomes were collected in Oakland, Miami, and Austin. In Oakland, new small schools created through Oakland Community Organizations' organizing scored better on California's Academic Performance Index than the large schools they replaced; the new small schools also showed early evidence of improved college-preparatory coursework completion, graduation, and college-going rates. In Miami, gains in the percentage of students meeting standards in schools using the Direct Instruction literacy program and receiving intensive support from People Acting for Community Together (PACT) outpaced gains in the district and in a demographically similar set of schools in third and fourth grades. The schools targeted by PACT's organizing also outpaced the district and comparison group in moving students out of the lowest achievement level. In Austin, researchers were able to construct a measure of organizing "intensity" and conduct a regression analysis on the relationship between organizing intensity and improvements in student test scores. The analysis using this measure showed that the greater the intensity of organizing, the more likely a school was to make gains in the percentage of students meeting standards (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009b).

Community Capacity

Both national studies of education organizing found that community capacity is what allows communities to mobilize the power needed to hold systems accountable. Long-term community capacity is also an important source of stability and support for schools. To understand the contributions of education organizing to the development of community capacity, Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister combined extensive interview data with a survey of adult and youth members of organizing groups. Leaders reported that their participation in organizing had increased their ability to research and solve problems, form relationships, and carry out organizing activities including facilitating meetings, public speaking, and meeting with public officials. Leaders reported that their involvement in organizing had increased their knowledge of the school system and understanding of school policies and had made them more likely to look at data on school performance. Leaders also reported new personal aspirations as a result of their involvement in organizing – 60 percent of adult leaders reported that they had increased aspirations for themselves and their families, and 80 percent of young people intended to pursue a college education. Eighty-nine percent of young people reported that their involvement in organizing had made them more likely to complete high school (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a; Gold et al. 2004).

The studies just reviewed showed positive impacts on school capacity, student outcomes, community capacity, and a number of specific local and state education policies. They also documented the growing presence of community organizations in school reforms. But the impact of community organizing is only one part of what we can learn from this literature. Many of the same studies also discuss effective strategies and challenges of the process of community organizing for school reform.

Effective Strategies in Community Organizing for School Reform

Community organizing employs a unique set of strategies to influence school reform decisions. This section looks across existing research to identify the specific strategies that are most successful to community organizations. Where appropriate, we cite specific scholars in this section, but in other places we pull findings from across the studies previously reviewed.

Della Porta and Diani (1999) categorize the multiple strategies into the logic of numbers, material damage, and bearing witness. Inflicting material damage through a product boycott or demonstrating that large numbers of people care about an issue through a confrontational protest are the most visible and radical of community organizing tactics, but they are not the entirety of community organizing. Bearing witness is also used frequently – publishing a report about an issue, providing testimony at a school board meeting, or holding a press conference. Renée (2006) found six activities were most common among the sixty-four California education organizations in her study: building strategic alliances with decision-makers, leadership training, member education, campaign activities, planning campaigns, and conducting research.

The many book-length investigations and shorter case studies of community organizing for school reform that have been published over the last decade vividly describe the organizing process, the obstacles facing organizing groups, and the strategic choices they make to further their goals. Across the literature, several common strategies have emerged that effective organizing groups use, in concert, to win meaningful education reforms:

- Recognize the complexity of school systems and focus their work at multiple levels – school, district, and often state.
- Develop alliances with a range of institutions, organizations, and stakeholders to develop a broad constituency for reform and to access knowledge and relationships beyond their immediate scope.
- Work with academics and use data and research on education reform strategies to craft demands that address core problems of teaching and learning.
- Develop mutually accountable relationships with educators and education officials and carefully balance inside negotiation with public pressure.

In this section we describe each of these strategies in more detail.

Working at Multiple Levels

Community organizing groups have come to recognize the importance of working at multiple levels of the school system simultaneously. While many groups initiate organizing at one level – often the school level, where they have close connections to parents or young people – they often find that changes at the district or state level are necessary to provide the resources or flexibility necessary to implement school-level campaigns (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a).

Individual schools are important sites for building a base and cultivating relationships. Parents and young people relate to their local schools and naturally view education issues primarily through the lens of the schools they or their children attend. Schools are also where the buck stops in terms of educational change – personalized instruction, improved school climate, and stronger teacher–student relationships all play out at the school and classroom levels.

Many organizing groups have found that building school capacity and improving student outcomes requires intensive, sustained engagement with teachers, principals, and parents. The engagement focuses on issues at the school level, as well as on district and state policy. Districts establish policies that constrain schools' choices on curriculum, staffing arrangements, and after-school programming and control the bulk of

the resources flowing to schools. States have taken on ever-larger roles in setting standards and establishing accountability regimes, particularly since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. State departments of education have access to larger pots of funding than do districts, and organizing campaigns often target state legislatures for additional appropriations.

Community organizers in Chicago followed such a path after identifying high turnover of teachers, due to their lack of experience with and connection to the community, as a major problem. Drawing on a successful teacher preparation program developed by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), Chicago ACORN called for creating a statewide "Grow Your Own" teacher pipeline strategy to train teacher paraprofessionals and community residents to become teachers in their neighborhood schools. ACORN worked with LSNA and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform to assemble a coalition of community organizing groups, district officials, leaders from university teacher preparation programs, the teachers unions, and elected officials to advocate for the statewide teacher pipeline program. This coalition secured passage of the 2004 Grow Your Own Teachers Act and won $11 million in successive appropriations to support the program (McAlister, Mediratta & Shah 2009). The statewide Grow Your Own Teachers program is implemented by regional consortia of universities, school districts, and community organizations that work together to develop local teacher pipeline programs.

Working through Alliances and Coalitions

Another way that community organizing groups build power and the ability to act at multiple levels is by developing alliances with a range of stakeholders and participating in formal coalitions. By working jointly on issues of common concern, organizing groups can bring to bear the combined power of their bases and relationships with officials and power brokers. By working collaboratively with advocacy organizations, education officials, researchers, businesses, and a host of other stakeholders, groups can gain access to new decision-making circles and new allies and demonstrate broad agreement about their proposals for change.

In New York City, the Parents Action Committee (PAC) established by New Settlement Apartments, a housing and social services group, organized for the ouster of the unresponsive principal of one of the lowest-performing schools in New York City. When they subsequently failed to influence the selection of a replacement principal, the leaders of the PAC realized that they needed to build the power to influence decision making at the local school-district level. They reached out to five other community-based organizations in the area and formed the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools (CC9) (Zachary & olatoye 2001).

After several major victories, including a lead teacher program to improve staff development and retention in ten schools, control of New York City schools was consolidated under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein, and local districts were abolished. Responding to the new need to act at the city level, CC9 joined forces with other local coalitions of organizing groups in Brooklyn and Queens to form the citywide New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ). Similarly, youth organizing groups formed the citywide Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) to advocate for the needs of under-served high school students across New York City.

Another well-referenced example is the work of a broad-based coalition called Communities for Educational Equity (CEE) that led to a school board resolution establishing the college preparatory sequence as the default curriculum in Los Angeles. Conversations between youth and parent organizations, the United Way, and the Alliance for a Better Community, a Latino advocacy group, led to the formation of CEE by twenty-five parent and student organizing groups, universities, civil rights and advocacy organizations, and representatives of elected education officials. The coalition put the weight of research, advocacy, and well-established civil rights organizations behind local organizing by South Central Youth Empowered thru Action, the youth organizing arm of Community Coalition, and moved the push for expanded college prep access to a much larger stage. Since the passage of the school board resolution mandating college prep as the standard curriculum, CEE has continued to monitor the district's implementation of the policy (United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2007).

Using Data and Research

Research is an integral part of the community organizing cycle. Regardless of issue area, organizing groups combine one-on-one meetings, house meetings, surveys, and other forms of eliciting members' concerns with research to hone leaders' understanding of issues, craft solutions, and identify potential allies. Organizing groups often establish research committees in the early stages of a campaign and conduct "research actions" in which they meet with officials and experts to explore multiple dimensions of an identified issue and begin to map out who has the authority to respond to potential demands (Shirley 2009). The power maps described earlier are often part of this process.

Because of the complexity of school reform, research is crucially important in education organizing. Education justice organizations use research as a tool in defining policy problems, advancing political proposals, litigating, and monitoring the implementation of laws. Many groups have enduring relationships with university-based researchers that afford them access to data on school performance and current scholarship on education issues (Renée 2006).

The Education Justice Collaborative in California, for example, is a collaboration of organizing, advocacy, and legal groups, facilitated by the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) at UCLA, in which groups share information and strategy. IDEA researchers conduct data analyses, identify relevant scholarship, and translate research into layperson-friendly formats to support the member groups of the collaborative (Oakes et al. 2008).

In Philadelphia, youth leaders of Youth United for Change seized the opportunity created by schools CEO Paul Vallas to open new, themed academies of 800 to 1,000 students and to envision the redesign of several large, struggling high schools where the group had a base. The youth leaders surveyed students to gather their ideas for a redesigned campus and worked with the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and Research for Action to research best practices for small schools. With the assistance of the intermediary organizations, they traveled to Chicago, Oakland, Providence, and New York City to learn from the experiences of small schools there and delved into research on the small schools movement (Suess & Lewis 2007). They crafted a successful campaign to divide two under-served Philadelphia high schools into campuses of small, themed academies of no more than 400 to 500 students and identified a school design firm to facilitate a public process.

Balancing Collaboration and Pressure

Community organizing groups are committed to ensuring that their communities have equitable access and equitable outcomes – not to any one set of tactics. Despite their reputation for protests, demonstrations, and other public actions to make demands of officials and institutions, most organizing groups use a mix of collaboration and pressure and usually only resort to public, contentious action when negotiation and collaboration has failed (Ford Foundation and Center for Community Change 2008; Gold, Simon & Brown 2002a).

The impetus for collaboration is even greater within education organizing. Because of the complexity of education and the need to sustain and deepen multiple facets of reform simultaneously (Coburn 2003), organizing groups need long-term access to education decision-makers and experts. Organizing groups have discovered the need to shift adversarial relationships through new tactics that facilitate constructive dialogue around school reform (AISR 2010b).

The growth of school-based organizing has also encouraged the development of collaborative relationships with educators. Much of school-based organizing is about transforming the culture of schools so that parents, teachers, principals, and the larger community work together for the benefit of children; it's also about creating the conditions for teachers to collaborate with one another. This kind of transformation is achieved through the traditions of relational culture building in organizing. Groups emphasize trusting, mutually accountable relationships and the cultivation of leaders from across the school community, with the goal of parents and educators viewing each other as allies in the work of improving the school. This approach has been used in creating successful collaboration between community organizations and schools in both Oakland and New York. In both cities, community organizations helped create policies establishing their presence on high school campus and now provide a range of services to students that extend beyond community organizing.[12]

Organizing groups also seek common ground and cultivate collaborations and alliances with district- and state-level officials. District officials often see organizing groups as capable allies for advancing reforms that will benefit under-served students. Former Austin, Texas, superintendent Pascale Forgione met regularly with Alliance Schools leaders and organizers from Austin Interfaith. He was so convinced of the benefits of their parent engagement strategies that he instituted them districtwide (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009b). District administrators have been important allies of the Alliance Schools work across Texas, where their support facilitates school involvement and demonstrates to school-level educators that the district takes parent engagement seriously. In New England, the Pioneer Valley Project collaborated with the Springfield, Massachusetts, school district and the local teachers union to develop a home visit program for elementary schools (Rose 2007).

Reliance on collaborative or pressure tactics is not an either/or. All organizing groups use a careful balance of inside and outside strategies. Public actions such as letter-writing campaigns, accountability sessions, and large turnout at school board meetings are tools that organizing groups use to demonstrate the power of their organized base and establish themselves as legitimate education stakeholders. In the late 1990s, People Acting for Community Together (PACT) conducted extensive research to identify reading programs that would better serve the large immigrant and low-income student populations in local schools in Miami. They met extensively with school board members and district administrators to gain their support for the curriculum PACT had identified. PACT turned out hundreds of members to the meeting at which the school board would vote on whether to use the program – not as a contentious or escalation tactic, but rather to demonstrate broad community and parent support for the program (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a).

[12] More information on these relationships can be found online at <www.maketheroad.org/article.php?ID=463> and <www.youthtogether.net/peace/2010/06/25/youth-together-sites>.

Yet, organizing groups are not unwilling to use public action to pressure or even embarrass officials, and the willingness to engage in contentious action when necessary is one of the hallmarks of community organizing. Organizing groups exist to further the interests of marginalized communities, and they prioritize the needs of their constituency above their relationships with allies. The ability to publicly mobilize large numbers of people with common interests and attract media attention is a core source of the power community organizing has to make demands for equity and accountability. The IAF sums up this stance in the saying, "No permanent friends, no permanent enemies" (Warren 2001).

While organizing groups generally approach school-level educators as allies, parent and youth leaders in Philadelphia and New York and elsewhere have made the decision to organize for the removal of principals when they agree that the principals are complacent in the face of poor outcomes and unresponsive to parents' and young people's demands for change. Chicago ACORN leaders mobilized against the district's "Renaissance 2010" plan to close and replace dozens of schools because the ACORN leaders had evidence that low-income children would largely be shut out of the new schools. ACORN was simultaneously cooperating with the district to draft legislation for a new teacher pipeline program, but the ACORN leaders felt strongly enough about Renaissance 2010 to risk damage to their relationship with district leaders (McAlister, Mediratta & Shah 2009).

One of the most striking findings of Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister's 2009 study of community organizing groups is that principals and district and elected officials nearly unanimously endorsed this mix of inside collaboration and outside pressure as an asset. For one thing, educators appreciated the advocacy of organizing groups on shared interests, especially when political and bureaucratic relationships constrain how forcefully educators themselves can made demands. Though Chicago ACORN, for example, sometimes took an oppositional stance early in its education organizing that damaged its relationships with schools, the group quickly learned that organizing publicly for capital funding on behalf of schools made principals and teachers more receptive to subsequent work on teacher quality. In New York City, a local superintendent noted that the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition could "leverage support for mutually identified district needs" based on their relationships with elected officials and reputation as effective organizers (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a).

Furthermore, organizing groups played a crucial role as "critical friends" of school systems. Educators appreciated organizing groups' abilities to frame district decisions in terms of their impact on low-income and marginalized communities. Former Austin superintendent Forgione explained,

> Austin Interfaith has got to be my critical friend. They're not my best friend. They've got to be critical. They've got to be the conscience of my community. Sometimes I don't want to hear it; most of the times I don't mind because we've got such shared values. But whether I like it or not, that's their job. (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a)

One reason educators are willing to hear criticism from organizing groups is that they view the groups as authentic representatives of under-served communities. The attention that organizing groups pay to building a base, constantly developing grassroots leaders, and listening to the needs and desires of members translates into trust on the part of educators. Paul Vallas, who served as schools CEO in both Chicago and Philadelphia before taking the helm of the Recovery School District in New Orleans, explained why he was willing to work with organizing groups in those cities:

> A lot of school reformers don't even live in the city. [Organizing groups] represent some of the most racially and economically isolated district schools in some of the poorest communities. (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a)

Challenges Facing Community Organizing for School Reform

Community organizing as a school reform strategy faces most of the same daunting, well-documented barriers to sustained reform that other school reform movements face: administrative and policy turmoil; an emphasis on short-term achievement gains versus long-term change; insufficient resources and competing priorities; the complexity of federal, state, and district roles in American education; and the difficulty of shifting deeply held beliefs (Shirley 2009; Renée, Welner & Oakes 2010).

Community organizing as an "outside" strategy led by communities with comparatively few material resources and a history of disenfranchisement faces additional obstacles. Despite the evidence of groups' sophistication in balancing collaboration and pressure to maintain relationships with educators, such relationships take time to develop, depend on a mutual understanding of the very different cultures of organizing and public education, and are easily damaged. Community organizing often depends on building coalitions between multiple organizing groups and with other constituencies; groups have differential access to potential allies, thought partners, and coalitions, depending on their geographic location and the density of community organizing groups in their city or town.

The Importance and Fragility of a Favorable Political Climate

Community organizing success depends on winning agreement around school reform demands from principals, school boards, superintendents, mayors in some cases, and often state boards of education and legislatures. The degree to which community organizing groups will be well received by all of these stakeholders depends on their experience with and disposition toward community organizing, as well as the strategies used by groups to approach them.

Further, some political moments are more conducive to organizing than others. Battles over contract negotiations, charter schools, vouchers, mayoral control, and other contentious issues can monopolize public attention and squeeze out the other priorities of organizing groups. Organizing groups affiliated with the Gamaliel network in Wisconsin worked for several years in the early 2000s to put forth proposals for redesigning state funding, only to see the state's education budget held hostage to prolonged wrangling over a cap on voucher schools (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a).

Community organizing groups have a stronger chance for victory when their demands are well aligned to the priorities of education officials. When district and school officials see organizing demands as furthering their own agendas for change, they are often more willing to negotiate and compromise on the details of proposals. In the absence of this alignment, though, it can be hard for organizing groups to get traction. When leaders of Alliance Schools in Austin worked with the local IAF affiliate, Austin Interfaith, to develop a proposal for a subdistrict to pilot alternative assessments, they faced intense opposition from the school system. Though the superintendent, Pascale Forgione Jr., was a strong ally of Austin Interfaith, he was also a proponent of standards-based education and had spent several years designing standardized tests. Nor was it politically feasible, in the home state of high-stakes testing, to allow a group of schools to opt out of the state accountability regime (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009b).

Collaboration between educators and organizing groups also requires some mutual appreciation of very different cultures. Whereas organizing values leadership that is distributed and decision making by consensus, schools and districts are often hierarchical, and decisions are continually passed up the chain of command.

At the school level, teachers often feel disempowered and fight to be viewed as professionals. Teachers sometimes see the demands of organizing groups for greater decision making as a threat to their autonomy and what little professional power they hold. This dynamic requires careful attention and relationship building (Shirley 2002).

At the district level, PACT's relationships with the superintendent and school board members in Miami had been mainly positive; PACT had often invited these officials to accountability sessions to publicly state their support for the group's priorities. When the district hired a new superintendent, the group met with him several times and invited him to a large accountability session to negotiate his support for maintaining their literacy intervention in two dozen struggling schools. The superintendent was unavailable and sent a deputy in his place; PACT refused to give the floor to the deputy, since he lacked the authority to make decisions, and kept an empty chair on the stage to represent the superintendent's absence. This escalation, stemming from a lack of understanding on the superintendent's part of the role of accountability sessions in PACT's organizing and a failure on PACT's part to appreciate the superintendent's genuine desire to negotiate, ended any chance for compromise on the literacy initiative (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a).

On top of the delicacy of navigating the political climate and conflicting cultures is layered the instability and turmoil that face many school districts. The average tenure of an urban superintendent is three and a half years (Council of the Great City Schools 2008/2009); principals, especially in struggling schools, also turn over frequently. Building sustainable agreements across so many changing stakeholders, each with his or her own agenda, presents a significant challenge to community organizers.

The Limits of Organizational Capacity

Community organizing groups are often held up as generating large returns on the investments of foundations – they win major changes in policy, attract massive resources, and generate social and community capacity with a handful of staff and tiny budgets. But the small size (and generally low pay) of the staff, coupled with the fact that the work of the organization is carried out by volunteer leaders with families and work responsibilities, puts a tremendous strain on the ability of organizing groups to keep multiple campaigns moving forward.

Organizers and leaders often play roles in several issue areas and campaigns simultaneously. Campaigns at the school, district, and state levels move at different speeds and require different organizing strategies. When organizers and leaders turn over, they take substantial institutional knowledge with them. This is a particular struggle for youth-led organizing, where campaigns can take longer to complete than the time students spend in high school.

Insufficient Density of Organizations Working Together

Collaboration is an important strategy of community organizing. Yet without sufficient density of organizations in one area, collaboration is challenging. Organizers interviewed for the Nellie Mae–initiated scan of organizing in New England noted that while foundations often view funding multiple organizations to do education work in the same city as a duplication of efforts, it is difficult for organizing to have an impact until it attains sufficient density for groups to work together and mobilize a large enough constituency to shift power dynamics.

Collaboration is particularly challenging in rural areas. Rural organizing, like rural school reform, is largely ignored in research literature and under-funded in practice. The national organizing networks like IAF, ACORN, or PICO are important sources of training, leadership development, research expertise, and knowledge about promising practices, yet none of the national networks have much presence outside of cities.

The Critical Role of Funders

Existing academic literature does not report much about the difference between community-initiated versus foundation-initiated efforts, nor is there extensive research on the role of foundations in supporting and shaping community organizing for school reform. However, based on our extensive experience in this field, especially providing research and policy support to local organizations and state and national collaborations, we know that the role of foundations has been critical to developing and supporting community organizing for school reform.

For collaboration between community organizations and foundations to succeed, attention to building relationships early on in the process of researching and shaping reform agendas is crucial. In addition, funders need to be able to weather some of the more confrontational relationships that community organizations engage in and trust in the longer-term process an organization must go through in creating a space for itself in a policy-making venue. While uncomfortable at times, these moments, our experience and research show, are part of a cycle that often results in "critical friend" relationships between community organizations and other stakeholders. These relationships add a depth, quality, and permanence to school reform efforts that are well worth moments of discomfort.

Despite these challenges, we know that most of the initiatives described in this paper involved partnerships between foundations and community organizing groups. In these efforts, foundations bring not just funding, but also capacity and social capital needed to form strategic relationships. For example, the substantial funding the Gates Foundation provided to organizations working on the implementation of college access policies in Los Angeles helped establish the organizations as a key partner within the district. The combination of fiscal and social resources that the Foundation provided meant that organizations had the capacity to participate in district meetings, join district commissions, and follow the district closely as it worked toward policy adoption.

Some foundations go beyond providing funding to organizations – they have developed trainings on important topics like strategic communications and leadership development and have created critical opportunities for community organizations to network and learn from each other. For example, numerous local and national foundations joined government agencies in supporting the development of CEJ and the UYC. The result is that both coalitions have stable resources to meaningfully and regularly engage in school-district decision making. Another example is a coalition of funders, Communities for Public Education Reform (CPER), which works to leverage investments from multiple foundations to strategically focus on developing community organizing potential in specific cities around the nation. Many of the successful campaigns described in the research literature received funding and capacity-building assistance from CPER.

Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy

With all its challenges, community organizing is hardly a magic bullet for all that ails public education. But community organizing offers a unique set of effective strategies for achieving school improvement, especially in partnership with other reform strategies. The research suggests that community organizing for school reform has the potential to advance equity, create innovative solutions that reflect the interests and experiences of disenfranchised communities, and build the long-term social capital of under-represented communities both to support schools and districts and to hold them accountable for improving achievement.

Education organizing – unique in its blend of outside-in and inside-out strategies – is as much about building coalitions with school districts and policy-makers as it is about protesting against them. In the end, most of the people who work in schools systems – administrators, teachers, and staff, as well as the communities that are served by the school system – share a deep commitment to improving the life opportunities of young people. Some of the most effective campaigns for equitable education reform succeed by leveraging this shared commitment in order to create – and then sustain – improvement in the nation's most underserved schools.

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